

TENNESSEAN OP-ED: ONLY WINNER IS PUBLIC THAT GOT TO SEE PROCESS

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By U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper

Health-care
reform summit

I was shocked to be invited to this week's health-care summit. Although I've been working to improve U.S. health care for many years (and have taught health policy at Vanderbilt for over a decade), I am hardly a favorite of Democratic leadership in Congress. The speaker had 10 tickets, but 250 House Democrats wanted them. To my surprise, on Tuesday afternoon I was given the last ticket for Thursday's meeting. Why? I am a "Blue Dog" Democrat.

Blue Dogs are fiscal conservatives who recently forced Congress to return to pay-as-you-go budgeting. Many budget experts think that "paygo" is the first step toward getting America back on track. Paygo was the law of the land from 1990 to 2002 and helped produce the longest streak of budget surpluses in modern history, three years from 1998-2000. Tragically, Congress let paygo expire in 2002, but Blue Dogs were finally able to revive it last month.

Given the nature of politics, people are probably wondering whether the speaker asked me to do anything in order to get the ticket. The answer is no. She did not ask and I certainly did not offer. Her staff knows that I am undecided on President Barack Obama's recent 11-page statement of health-care reform ideas.

I'd never been to Blair House before. It's the president's "guest house" and sits directly across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House. It's spacious inside, with lots of diplomatic reception rooms and chandeliers. President Harry Truman lived there during most of his presidency because the real White House was under extensive renovation.

The atmosphere was hectic on the morning of the summit. No president had ever called for a televised discussion on such a complex topic before. People were edgy. One woman turned suddenly with a large purse and, without seeing me, spilled coffee all over me. Not a great way to start a meeting but, fortunately, I was wearing a dark suit.

Search for
compromise

I thought Sen. Lamar Alexander did an excellent job for Republicans in his opening statement. Minority Leader Mitch McConnell was shrewd to defer to him. But the president was the one who really showed a remarkable mastery of the issues, as well as of his own emotions, as he fished for bipartisan compromises.

The meeting itself seemed to go on forever. Six hours of talking about health legislation can strain anyone's patience. The deficit issues that I care most about were not scheduled to come up until the last half of the meeting. Soon we were running an hour late.

Finally, I was recognized for a few minutes about four hours into the meeting. The video is available at my Web site, www.cooper.house.gov. I tried to strengthen the backbone of both parties on deficit reduction issues.

When the meeting ended, I thought that the only winners were folks back home. This was a rare look at the legislative process, which has often been compared to sausage-making. It's not pretty, but, when it's done right, the final product tastes really good. It's the system our founders gave us over 200 years ago. And it has produced the greatest nation in the world.